

On the final day of the Grenfell Tower fire inquiry last week, Richard Millett KC said: 'Each and every one of the deaths that occurred was avoidable.' But the roots of the tragedy – 40 years of deregulation – remain untouched / **By MADOC CAIRNS**

The greed and graft that built a tower of shame

“A DEPRESSING THING about the Grenfell disaster,” Peter Apps tells me, “is just how much was due to human beings behaving badly.” On 14 June 2017, 293 social housing tenants, overwhelmingly poor or ethnic minorities, were trapped when their home, London’s Grenfell Tower, in north Kensington, went up in flames. As the closing remarks of the ensuing inquiry made clear last week, none of them had to die. But 72 did.

As Apps, a veteran housing journalist, lays out in painstaking – and painful – detail in his new book, the 72 were victims many times over. Victims of corner-cutting building contractors, left to their own devices by a hands-off, eyes-shut state; victims of political neglect, a working-class, immigrant estate condemned to slow decay by a council dominated by the white and the wealthy. Victims of central government cuts, of fire service protocols recommending those inside “stay put” when they should have run.

But behind the faceless structural forces, uncoiling towards catastrophe over decades of inaction, Apps found the 72 were victims of individuals, too. “Some of it,” he said, “is just bad people doing bad things.” It sounds like hyperbole till you read the witness statements. One contractor implicated in Grenfell hailed the use of cheaper, flammable material on the building as “quids in”. Another, keen to corner the ecologically on-trend insulation market, buried the fire testing of a cladding product when the results were a “raging inferno”. Fake results were used to market it. One manufacturer, asked inconvenient questions about fire safety, put it in blunt terms: “I think [they] are getting me confused with someone who gives a damn.”

ANOTHER WITNESS, Brian Martin, the senior civil servant in charge of fire safety regulations in buildings, gave Apps the title of his book. Confronted with the abysmal state of British building regulations by an architect in 2016, he allegedly responded with a pithy, damning dismissal: “Show me the bodies.” “It was,” the architect told the inquiry, “as if he needed a disaster before he or the government would act.”

Health and safety was long out of fashion by 2016. Apps, beginning six decades ago,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10



PHOTO: ALAMY, JULIO ETCHART

Victims – of building contractors, political neglect and government cuts

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

charts how successive governments destroyed their own capacity to regulate housing. Margaret Thatcher literally threw away the rule book on building law; Tony Blair privatised state watchdogs then ordered builders to safety-check themselves. David Cameron's crusade against red-tape bureaucrats – austerity and its less homely sibling, the ill-starred “big society” – were final nails in the coffin of a safe, or even sane, housing market.

By 2005, Apps notes, the power of contractors had become so pervasive, their assumed right to self-regulate so irreproachable, that the few civil servants alert to the danger resorted to desperate measures. The Grenfell Inquiry, set up in 2017 and due to present its final report next year, questioned one civil servant who inserted a clause in the most recent regulations stipulating that “filler material” had to be of “limited combustibility”. He framed his amendments so carefully that contractors – and their lobbyists – didn't realise regulations were being tightened. The problem was, Apps says, that they didn't notice afterwards, either.

Every step of the way to the disaster in 2017, Apps tells me, at every crucial juncture, where rules were relaxed or bent or broken with impunity, people spoke out. And at every point before Grenfell, those voices were ignored. Most of all the people who lived in the tower, who saw, with horrible prescience,

that their home was a mass-casualty event waiting to happen.

Eddie Daffarn, a resident of Grenfell, community organiser and prolific blogger, had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the dangers waiting in Grenfell's 24 floors. The fire doors broke frequently: “repairs” by the council involved removing their auto-shut facility, sometimes preventing the doors closing at all. Firebreaks actively turned into their opposite. Eddie Daffarn raised this with the council – dominated by the white, monied residents of Kensington and Chelsea. They did nothing.

The lift was out of order, and couldn't be activated with standard fire keys: a decision made, Apps thinks, out of fear the residents would misuse it. Fire engines would struggle to access the tower in 2017; Daffarn had raised it with the council years before. They called him a fearmonger. Grenfell had no sprinklers, no fire alarm, only one staircase; despite years of requests, the council had yet to supply an evacuation plan. On the night of the disaster, firefighters, struggling to find their way through Grenfell's hundreds of flats, asked Kensington Council for a building plan. None could be found.

Given the real heroism of firefighters on the night, returning again and again to a building they thought might

collapse on top of them, it's a difficult point to raise. But, Apps tells me, the fire service has a share of the blame for what happened on 14 June. Emergency operators followed their training. Expecting active sprinklers and working fire doors, utterly unprepared for just how flammable the cladding now was, they told Grenfell residents, again and again, to “stay put”. The advice killed.

Perhaps even worse, Apps tells me, was the way operators dismissed residents, discounting eyewitness testimony of fire the length of the building, running rampant across floors. Moments like that punctuate the inquiry, Apps says: points where race, class, language, all loom large. “If these people all spoke like public-school educated judges,” he asks me, “would they have been ignored in the way they were?” The answer, if it was ever needed, had been given back in 2017.

By the time of the disaster, Apps tells me, the residents at Grenfell were living in an unsafe, undermaintained building, clad with material as flammable as petrol, with no fire alarm, no additional fire escapes, fire doors that would spread rather than contain the fire, and they knew it. So did the council. It spoke to a culture of carelessness, he says, of doing the minimum, shrugging responsibility, ignoring consequences. “Show me the bodies,” Brian Martin reportedly said. He got what he asked for.

Seventy-two people died that night: fathers, mothers, sisters, sons, newborns and pensioners. Apps tells their stories in *Show Me the Bodies*: Rania Ibrahim, Pily Burton, Gloria Trevisan. The survivors – 221 people, plus

the families and friends of the deceased – are here too, talking about the scandal after the scandal. Mourning families were shunted to distant parts of the borough, away from their loved ones, away from affordable food or childcare. It was salt in the wound for some survivors: the final proof that the council didn't care about their lives.

The malfunctioning fridge that prompted the conflagration was, Apps thinks, a kind of microcosm of the disaster itself. If the manufacturer had been bound by American regulations, for instance, it would have been metal on all sides. Instead, the back was plastic, flammable, an incipient inferno, waiting for a spark. Given enough time, enough space, and, on the fourth floor of the council flat in west London, the spark came. Wiring fused. Fire caught and spread; 72 people died.

And Peter Apps had seen it coming. Not, he stresses, thanks to any special insight. The horror of Grenfell is that foresight was never really necessary; only knowledge.

The horror of Grenfell is that foresight was never necessary; only knowledge that was widely available

And knowledge was widely available. Apps started to anticipate a disaster on the scale of Grenfell when investigating Lakanal House in Camberwell, south London. A high-rise block, like Grenfell, it was clad in flammable materials, under-repaired and uncared for. A fire broke out in 2009. Six people died. Listening to the 999 calls,

Apps realised that something was seriously wrong: materials, management, fire service protocols. Unresolved, another Lakanal House couldn't be far away.

It wasn't. The morning after Grenfell, Apps – then news editor at *Inside Housing* – sat up in bed, and said to himself: it had happened again. In the aftermath of the disaster, watching politicians try to control the narrative, framing the fire as the product of bad apples and individual errors, he realised something had to be done, something had to be said. Or it would happen again.

He's not optimistic that it won't. While combustible cladding has – at enormous political and financial expense – been consigned to the history books, Grenfell's roots in 40 years of deregulation remain untouched. Construction, repair and maintenance have been so stripped of oversight that a reversal would require a transformative step-change in policy. No political force seems likely to drive that, although, Apps speculates, climate change might force the state's hand.

THE INQUIRY might recommend prosecutions – “I describe Grenfell as a crime in the book,” Apps tells me, “for good reason” – but it'll be hard to pin manslaughter charges. Lengthy chains of causation mean culpability can be hidden from others – even from yourself – behind sliding screens of bureaucratic or corporate inertia. The bad people were one thing, Apps says, but probably worse were the normal, everyday people, who made decisions – or avoided them – that sent the 72 to an early death.

“It’s not about the state or the market,” he says, “but something about big organisations: the way they place us within systems that promote bad, inhumane behaviour.” They promote choice without responsibility: to fake tests, to rush accreditation, to botch repairs, to ignore complaints, to shut your eyes and ears to what’s happening all around you, to make choices that kill. “Some people,” Apps says, grimly, “were surprised when their own words were read out to them at the inquiry. They didn’t recognise themselves.”

Recognition is one thing; taking responsibility is another. Richard Millett KC, lead counsel to the inquiry, said last week that the process had become a “merry-go-round of buck-passing” between corporations, politicians and civil servants. Despite a government apology and promises of prosecution – though not earlier than 2025 – that merry-go-round, Millett noted, “turns still”. It’s easy to get cynical faced with this kind of behaviour, Apps says, looking at the “sheer number of people who were venal or greedy”. He tries not to give into the temptation. Grenfell placed the worst aspects of human beings on display: callousness, prejudice, greed. Amid the horror and the grief, it shone a subtler, softer light on something better.

WHEN THE fire started, Apps tells me, a group of Muslim men meeting at the local mosque for Ramadan were among the first responders, running to the blazing tower offering water, shelter, support. Local churches were part of that other story too, opening their doors to survivors in need of somewhere to stay; throwing their weight behind the struggle for justice. And residents, looking after themselves and each other, resolved that they wouldn’t be ignored again. In the fire, they helped each other escape. On the outside, they helped each other survive. After the close of the inquiry, Apps shared a statement from Grenfell United, the main campaign group for survivors of the disaster. “We ask all those who have stood with us until now to keep going,” it read. “This phase might be over, but the battle for justice is not.”

“It’s a strange thing about human beings,” Peter Apps says to me, “that lots of us would help a disabled person down the stairs, but not ensure that the building they’re in has a working lift.” The structural injustice Apps rails against, the malconduct and misregulation his book recounts, the neglect that killed: all were inhuman, but not anonymous. If they had a face, it was our own. *Show Me the Bodies* has a subtitle: *How We Let Grenfell Happen*. It’s an indictment. And a challenge. “The horrible irony of the title”, Apps says, is that it happened. “We’ve shown them the bodies,” he says “and they still won’t act.” Even after the death of the 72 – children, parents, lovers, friends – they won’t act. But we still can.

Show Me the Bodies: How We Let Grenfell Happen by Peter Apps is published in paperback this month by Oneworld Publications (£10.99).